

STARK AND COUNTY HEALTH DIRECTOR JOIN IN EFFORT TO REDUCE HEALTH DISPARITIES

Tuesday, 10 June 2008

Dr. Anthony Iton testifies before Stark's Health Subcommittee in Congress.

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WASHINGTON,

DC - Dr. Anthony Iton, Director and Health Officer of the Alameda County Public Health Department, testified today at a hearing on healthcare disparities chaired by Rep. Pete Stark (D-CA). The hearing before the Ways and Means Health Subcommittee addressed disparities that exist in health and access to health care for women and racial and ethnic minorities. Today's hearing is the first in at least a decade to address this important issue.

"I am grateful to Dr. Iton for bringing his expertise and experience to bear on this critical issue," said Rep. Stark. "We have a two-tiered health care system in America: one for those who are healthy, well-insured, and have money; and one for everyone else. As we gear up for healthcare reform, we must find solutions that eliminate the disparities in our healthcare system."

Dr. Iton discussed the extent to which race, class, wealth, education, geography and employment affect individuals' health status. He emphasized that universal health care is a necessary but incomplete step to eliminate disparities. Some highlights of his testimony include:

"Access to a high quality system of affordable healthcare is an important human right and a necessary strategy for improving health and quality of life and reducing health disparities, but healthcare alone is not sufficient to 'produce' health in populations."

“In general, our reactive healthcare system is primarily designed to mitigate the adverse consequences of chronic disease rather than prevent the occurrence of chronic disease in the first place. Thus the overall health of a community is not primarily shaped by access to healthcare, instead, access to healthcare serves to remediate and repair the damage that the healthcare system is presented with as a result of the overall prevalence of chronic disease within the community.”

“We need to create social policies and health policies that foster greater opportunities for all Americans, and reduce the stress of poverty by reducing its social consequences. One obvious example is to create universal access to a high quality and affordable system of healthcare. Other strategies are more complex but eminently achievable and include improving high school graduation rates, access to living wage employment, and affordable housing.”

“Improvements in all of these non-health outcomes will improve health outcomes. If we are serious about eliminating health disparities and preserving the solvency of the Medicare system, we need to begin to recognize these social policies as health policies.”

Dr. Anthony Iton, M.D., JD, MPH, serves as Director and Health Officer of the Alameda County Public Health Department. In this role, he oversees the Public Health Department’s operations, and works with the community to ensure the optimal health and well being of County residents. He has also helped produce the report “Life and Death from Unnatural Causes: Health and Social Inequity in Alameda County,” the executive summary of which can be found [here](#).

Alameda County runs three public hospitals, several outpatient health clinics, and funds healthcare services for the uninsured at several other community-based health clinics. In addition, Alameda County manages a large clinical mental health and substance abuse program, and provides a broad array of public health and environmental health services. The combined cost of these county-provided services is about \$1 billion dollars per year.

To access Dr. Iton’s full testimony, and for more information on today’s hearing, please visit the Health Subcommittee’s website.

Rep. Stark and Dr. Iton (at right) further discuss efforts needed to reduce health disparities after Tuesday’s hearing on health disparities.